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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 7757
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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 2009: THE "OTHER" GANDHI FACES HATE
SPEECH CHARGES

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Varun Gandhi, until now the lesser-known grandson of Indira Gandhi and a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Lok Sabha aspirant, burst onto the national scene when an election campaign video caught him delivering anti-Muslim remarks. The video footage, played in a continuous loop on Indian news channels over the weekend, shows Varun denigrating Muslims while addressing an election rally in his parliamentary constituency in northern Uttar Pradesh. The Election Commission, which is overseeing the April-May general election, filed a notice against Varun on March 18 for violating the Election Model Code of Conduct and advised the BJP not to run Gandhi as a candidate. The BJP has refused to withdraw Varun's candidacy, arguing that the Commission had over-stepped its mandate. Varun's virulent statements will likely damage the BJP's standing among secular and minority voters nationwide. However, political observers agree that the speech will help to consolidate the Hindu vote bank in Uttar Pradesh ahead of April-May parliamentary elections. End Summary.

Caught on Tape: Gandhi Scion Delivers Hate Speech

2. (SBU) Uttar Pradesh state authorities on March 18 filed criminal charges against 29-year old Varun Gandhi, the late Sanjay Gandhi's son, after video footage emerged of him delivering anti-Muslim remarks at a political rally earlier in March. In tapes aired by local media last week, Varun encouraged his audience to "Go to your villages and give the call that all Hindus must unite to save this area from becoming Pakistan." Varun is shown vowing to cut off the hands and chop the necks of Muslims who threaten Hindus. "After the election (this hand) will cut the necks of Muslims. Hail Lord Ram," he exclaimed with palms raised toward the crowd. Officials in Uttar Pradesh filed a criminal case against Varun for "promoting hatred." If convicted, he could face a maximum sentence of five years in prison. Varun has instantly become a rising star within the Hindu nationalist BJP and is the party candidate from Pilibhit, Uttar Pradesh. His mother, Maneka Gandhi, held the seat for four terms and was Cabinet Minister of Environmental Affairs in the BJP-led coalition in 1999-2004.

EC Censors, BJP Firmly Behind Varun

13. (SBU) India's Election Commission (EC) on March 22 ruled that Varun's remarks were in violation of the Election Model Code of Conduct. In a ten-page ruling, the EC stated that Varun's speech promoted "hatred and ill-will" toward the Indian Muslim community. The commission further advised the BJP to withdraw Varun's Lok Sabha candidacy, adding that the party would be perceived as "endorsing" a communal agenda.

14. (SBU) The BJP, however, rejected the EC action, saying Varun was its candidate for the Philibhit constituency and accusing the EC of overstepping its mandate in advising the party on candidate selection. BJP spokesman Balbir Punja slammed the EC decision as an "unprecedented" attempt to "redefine the contours of democratic practices." BJP General Secretary Arun Jaitley noted that under the law the EC can only bar a candidate from contesting elections only if he or she has been convicted and sentenced for more than three years.

Varun: Video Was Doctored

15. (U) Last week, Varun denied any wrong doing as his virulent speech crowded media airwaves nationwide. Though Varun does not deny making controversial remarks, he insisted the videos had been "doctored" and that he was the "victim" of a political conspiracy. "This is not my voice, those are not my words. I've a soft voice, (but in the video) I sound like (Bollywood star) Amitabh Bachchan." In response to the

NEW DELHI 00000559 002 OF 003

EC censure, he accused the Commission of political bias. Varun pointed out that he was denied his "natural democratic right" to meet the Commission in-person before the judgment ruling was announced.

Congress, CPM, JDU Outcry Against Varun

16. (SBU) The BJP's refusal to withdraw Varun's candidacy has drawn criticism from several political parties. All Indian Congress Committee (AICC) General Secretary Digvijay Singh advised that all BJP coalition partners should think twice about their alliance with a party that is "endorsing the use" of abusive language against minorities. The Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI-M) said that it was proof that the BJP continues to support the "communal venom" of Varun's remarks. "It shows that the party is not in the least concerned about the Constitution, the democratic norms and political decency," observed CPI-M member Brinda Karat. The Janata Dal United party (JDU) chief Sharad Yadav, a BJP ally in Bihar, has been particularly vocal in criticizing the BJP. He said the EC was "within its jurisdiction" in indicting Varun and urged authorities to expedite criminal proceedings.

BJP Floundered Before Finding a Voice

17. (SBU) The BJP appears to have been blindsided initially by Varun's remarks. A day after the hate speech videos surfaced, party leaders attempted to play down its political significance. "We have not heard him say anything like this," said former BJP President M. Venkaiah Naidu. However, with every news and cable network playing the hate speech on continuous loop, the BJP could not afford to keep silent on the issue. On March 17, BJP spokesperson Ravi Shankar Prasad told press that the BJP "completely disagrees, dissociates and disapproves" with the contents of Varun's speech. It was only after a March 23 meeting that the BJP came out fully behind Varun, signaling that the BJP sees a net negative if they jettison Varun. Several contacts surveyed by Poloff agreed that the speech will ultimately brighten the BJP's electoral prospects in at least six constituencies in Uttar Pradesh. They expect more communal tension in the state

closer to the poll dates. According to contacts, by endorsing Varun, the BJP has formally injected Hindutva into the campaign.

18. (SBU) Some observers saw more sinister machinations at work in the controversy. Zaheer Mustafa, editor of the In Dinon, an Urdu language daily, told us the Varun controversy is a "well thought out RSS conspiracy." He noted vote banks within Uttar Pradesh are divided along religious lines and that ratcheting up Hindutva rhetoric would help consolidate the Hindu support. Moreover, the RSS-BJP have been planning to project Varun as the youth face of the Sangh Parivar to match the stature of his cousin Rahul Gandhi, an emerging Congress Party leader.

Family Feud in the UP

19. (SBU) Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, has emerged as the battleground state in upcoming elections with its 80 Lok Sabha seats up for grabs. All four politically active Nehru-Gandhi members are contesting elections from the state. Sonia Gandhi and her son, Rahul, are the Congress Party candidates from Rae Bareilly and Amethi districts. Meanwhile, Varun and his mother, Maneka, will contest from Pilibhit and Aonla districts as BJP Lok Sabha candidates. Varun's anti-Muslim remarks were particularly jarring for many because they come from a member of a family that has built its political reputation on the notion of a secular society and tolerance for religious minorities. Sonia and Rahul have not commented on Varun's alleged remarks.

NEW DELHI 00000559 003 OF 003

Priyanka Gandhi, Sonia's usually reserved daughter, criticized her cousin during an elections rally in her mother's constituency on March 23. She stated that Varun's speech went against the "principles of the Gandhi family and what the members of this family lived and died for." Priyanka also recommended that her cousin "properly" read the Gita, an ancient Hindu text, to understand its message.

Comment: Hindutva: Tried and True BJP Elections Strategy

10. (SBU) In the run-up to hotly contested April-May general elections, Varun Gandhi's anti-Muslim tirade should not come as a complete surprise. Social tensions generally tend to rise before Indian elections because many parties, the Congress and BJP included, believe they benefit at the polls when the electorate is polarized over certain issues. For the BJP and the Sangh Parivar this means ramping up Hindutva themes during elections season in an effort to consolidate the Hindu vote bank, particularly in states such as Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat where the Muslim population is sizeable. The media attention that the speech has garnered has helped to establish Varun's Hindutva credentials and ensure a bright future in the BJP. Like Narendra Modi, he will be deployed by the BJP to campaign in other constituencies and states. Varun Gandhi has emerged as a formidable opposition force to the youth wave in the Congress Party, led by his cousin Rahul Gandhi. End Comment.

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